

# A holistic open-pit mine slope stability index using Artificial Neural Networks

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## Abstract

The slopes in open-pit mines are typically excavated to the steepest feasible angle to maximize profits. However, there is a greater risk of slope failure associated with steeper slopes. An open-pit slope represents a complex multivariate rock engineering system. Interactions between the factors affecting slope stability in open pit mines are therefore more complex and often difficult to define, impeding the use of conventional methods. To address the problem, the primary role of rock mass structure, in situ stress, waterflow, and construction have been extended into 18 key parameters. The stability status of slopes and parameter importance are investigated by means of computational intelligence tools such as Artificial Neural Networks. An optimized Back Propagation network is trained with an extensive database of 141 worldwide case histories of open-pit mines. The inputs refer to the values of extended parameters which include 18 parameters relating to open-pit slope stability. The produced output is an estimated potential for instability. To minimize the subjectivity, the method of partitioning the connection weights is applied in order to rate the significance of the involved parameters. The problem of slope stability is therefore modelled as a function approximation. A new Open-pit Mine Slope Stability Index is thus proposed to assess the potential status regime from a holistic point of view. These values are validated by computing the predicted values against the observed status of stability. The reliability of the predictive capability is computed as the Mean Squared Error, and further validated through a Receiver Operating Characteristic curve. Together with a Mean Squared Error of 0.0001, and Receiver Operating Characteristic curve of 98%, the application illustrates that the prediction of slope stability through Artificial Neural Networks produces fast convergence giving reliable predictions, and thus being a useful tool at the preliminary feasibility stage of study.

## INTRODUCTION

In order for a mining company to make full use of its mineral resource, the final slopes are generally as steep as possible (Sjoberg, 1999). A change in slope angle by as little as 2 – 3 ° can be measured in hundreds of millions of dollars in project revenue (Lilly, 2002). However, the risk of steeper slope angles increases the risk of slope failure. Open-pit mines are associated with large scale rock slopes, which form complex rock engineering systems (Franz, 2009). Slope failure is therefore often a combination of failures along pre-existing geological planes of weakness and failure of intact rock (Sjoberg, 1999). The complexity of the failure results from various factors affecting the stability, which include, amongst others, the geological setting, the geometry of the slopes, the tectonic environment, and/or the short and long term precipitation (Flores & Karzulovic, 2000). As a result, conventional methods of slope stability analysis are not suitably equipped to analyse such complex systems (Jang 1991).

Artificial Neural Networks (ANN) provide a powerful tool to evaluate such complex rock engineering systems. The idea behind the ANN approach stems from the fact that intelligent machines are capable of

replicating functions of the human brain such as pattern recognition and modelling of non-linear relationships of multivariate dynamic systems (Haykin, 1994). The Rock Engineering Mechanism Information Technology (REMIT), developed by Hudson (1992), established essential parameters for knowledge infrastructure of rock engineering. This included a list and description of all the rock properties and their associated descriptions for the rock engineering mechanisms.

Open-pit mines represent a non-linear multivariate dynamic system, where only a broad view of the physical and geometric parameters of the slope can be determined. The study therefore employs the ANN, which is capable of achieving non-one-to-one mapping (Jing and Hudson, 2002), to address slope stability, both as a function approximation problem, and as a classification problem. An ANN is trained using the knowledge extraction algorithm, Back Propagation (Gradient Decent) (BP), based on case histories from an extensive and worldwide database of open-pit rock slope stability, building on Naghadehi (2013). A new Open-pit Mine Slope Stability Index (OMSSI) is proposed which, in addition to general rock mass classifications, takes into account the complex interaction between rock engineering parameters and their influence on stability in a holistic approach.

## PREVIOUS STUDIES

There are various geotechnical engineering publications which make use of the ANN modelling approach in rock and soil mechanics. The growing interests in this subject stems from the fact that these systems are excellent in functions such as pattern recognition and the modelling of non-linear relationships of multivariate dynamic systems (Ferentinou & Sakellariou, 2015). Complex engineering mechanisms behaviours are determined by various interactive parameters, which are made up of complex interactions, much of which is not fully understood (Hudson, 1992). Hudson (1992) developed the Rock Engineering Mechanism Information Technologies (REMIT). From this, he produced the fundamental concepts of the infrastructure of rock engineering. These include a comprehensive list of all the rock properties and description of all rock mechanics and rock engineering mechanisms. However, still under research is the individual parameter interaction intensity and parameter dominance for rock engineering systems (Ferentinou & Sakellariou, 2015). Millar and Hudson (1994) applied two ANN's to monitor the performance of rock masses for mining geomechanics. Utilizing parameters from the RMR (Bieniawski 1989) as an example, they concluded that the simulation of ANN processing rules is capable of reproducing fundamental characteristics of rock mass behaviour in a qualitative manner. Neaupane and Achet (2004) presented a case study of landslide monitoring and evaluation at Okharpauwa, Nepal. Slope movements were predicted by means of a BP neural network. Apart from the antecedent rainfall, soil profile, groundwater level and shear strength of soil, an infiltration coefficient was introduced to the network architecture. The produced BP network illustrated slope movement prediction results that were promising and fairly accurate. Wang et al (2004) demonstrated the use of a BP neural network for the case of a landslide in Hubei Province of China. The predicted results indicated the landslide to be in a marginally stable condition. Sakellariou and Ferentinou (2005) presented a study of slope stability prediction using neural networks. Geometrical and geotechnical parameters were utilized as inputs, and the output was the factor of safety. The relative importance of the selected parameters were studied using the method of partitioning the weights and compared to the results obtained with Index Information Theory. Farrokhzad (2008) developed an ANN to predict slope stability at a specified location. The result was compared with older analysis (Bishop's model) methods to assess the validity of the BP network employed. It was concluded that the BP results were considerably close to the conventional analysis results. The prediction of slope stability agreed with values obtained from the Bishop's method.. The application of ANN to slope stability has not being restricted to natural slopes. Lin et al. (2008) aimed at creating an empirical model for assessing failure potential of highway slopes. Special attention was given to the failure characteristics of the highway slope in Alishan, Taiwan, prior to and post, 1999 Chi Chi earthquake. A database of 955 slope records from four highways constituted the basis of the study. The ANN produced was utilised to learn from the database, and thereafter used to study the effects of the earthquake movement on slope stability characteristics. The trained network proved to be effective in classifying slope performance records into groups of stable and failed slopes, using nine influencing variables. Furthermore, the predictive capability of the ANN was high and satisfactory for both training and testing data. Naghadehi (2013) proposed a Mine Slope Instability (MSII) to assess the stability conditions of slopes from 84 case

histories worldwide. Eighteen parameters that are obtainable and rated in the field, and that are considered to be most important were used for the MSII definition. Shahin et al. (2001) presents a general overview of some of the applications of ANN in solving some geotechnical problems. The applications include pile capacity prediction (Goh, 1994a, 1995b; Chan et al., 1995; Lee and Lee, 1996; Abu-Kiefa, 1998) settlement foundations, (Goh 1994a, 1995c; Sivakugan, 1998; Shahin et al., 2000) soil properties and behaviour (Goh, 1995; Ellis et al., 1995; Cal 1995; Gribb and Gribb, 1994), liquefaction (Goh, 1994b; Najjar and Ali, 1998; Ural and Saka, 1998) site characterisation, (Zhou and Wu, 1994; Basheer et al., 1996; Rizzo et al., 1996), earth retaining structures (Goh et al., 1995), slopes stability (Ni et al., 1996) and the design of tunnels and underground openings (Shi et al., 1998; Lee and Sterling, 1992). Based Shahin et al. (2001)y, it was concluded that ANNs perform better than, or as well as, conventional methods. However, it is observed that in a few situations ANN have failed to perform.

## COMPILATION OF WORLDWIDE DATABASE

### Influencing Parameters

Hudson (1992) proposed an ‘atlas’ of categories of factors that affect the stability of generic rock slopes. This is observed as the core list of the research with regards to stability of the slopes. The selection of parameters is based on the recommendations from literature and also builds on the parameters introduced by Naghadehi (2013), which take into account the details of open pit slopes. Eighteen parameters are divided into 9 main groups (Figure 1), which represent those parameters and are regarded to be the key influencing factors with regards to the potential for slope instability in open-pit mines. Each parameter corresponds to a rating value with 5 or 6 intervals. Each interval being rated by values ranging from 0.0 to 1.0. The higher the rating, the greater its contribution toward potential slope instability.

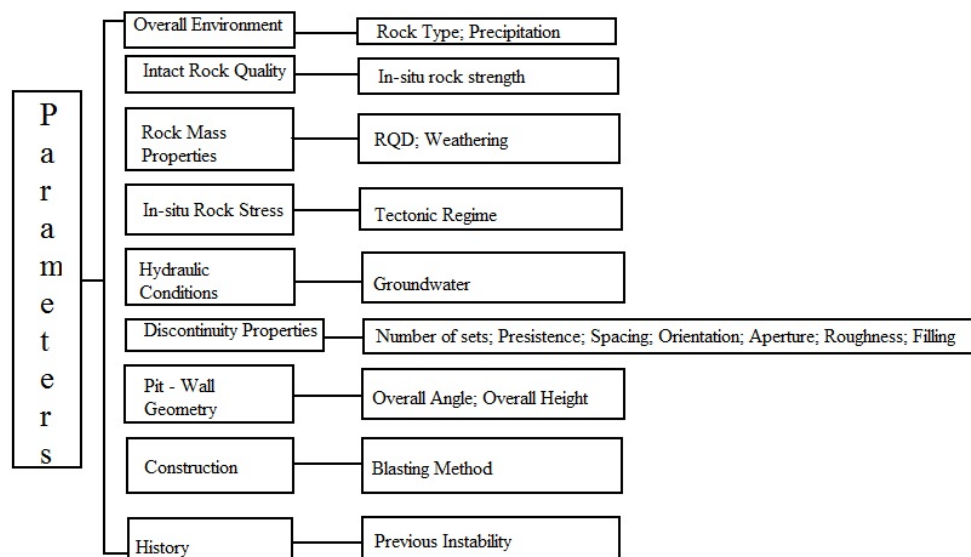


Figure 1: Selected parameters for the system (modified after Naghadehi, 2013)

### Database of Case Histories

Geotechnical information with regards to 141 case histories was compiled from 41 open-pit mines from various open pit mines in the world. The data was collected by means of publications and reports from literature, and by direct correspondence with associated mining companies. The stability status of every slope was also recorded at the time the measurement of parameters was taken. This allows the categorization of slopes into three main categories according their status of stability (Kozyrev, 2000; Naghadehi 2013): ‘Stable slopes’, ‘Failure in set of benches (inter-ramp failure)’, and ‘Overall failure’.

## BACK-PROPAGATION METHODOLOGY

Rosenblatt (1958) first introduced the perceptron model which was based on the brain model. The most commonly used multilayer perceptron is the back-propagation (BP) algorithm which is an extension of the least mean squares (LMS) (Haykin, 1994). Back-propagation describes the manner in which the gradient of the squared error function is computed for non-linear multilayer networks. Each unit in the hidden layer is interconnected with units of the output layer. However, units within the same layer are not interconnected (Figure 2).

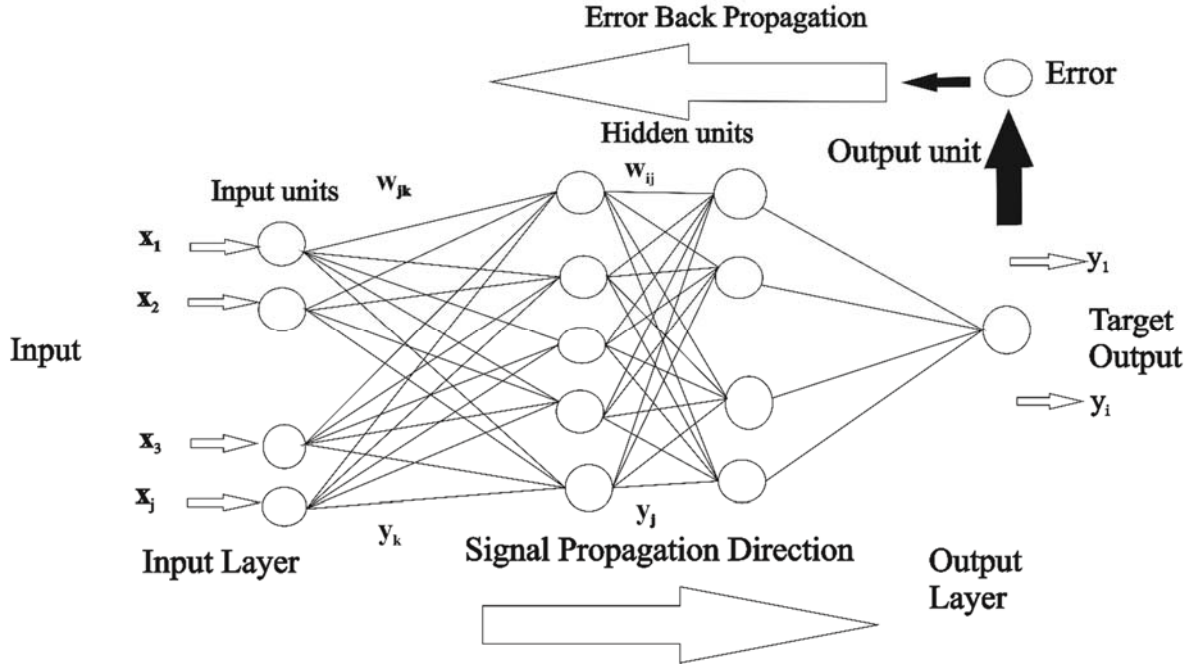


Figure 2: Typical Back-propagation network.

The basic mathematical concept of the BP is provided in literature (Hush and Horne 1999). An elementary mathematical description of the BP is given below. The BP algorithm employed in the current study uses the sigmoid function. Sigmoid functions are continuous differentials that consists of the hard limit transfer, the linear, and the log-sigmoid transfer functions. These functions are also known as the squashing functions since their output is limited to a limited range of values:

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{1+e^{(-ax)}} \quad [1]$$

Where  $a$  is a slope parameter.

In the forward pass, the given input vector  $y_k^{(p)}$  for each node  $j$  in the hidden layer receives a net input:

$$x_j^{(p)} = \sum_k w_{jk} y_k^{(p)} \quad [2]$$

$w_{jk}$  is the weight between hidden node  $j$  and input node  $k$ . Each node  $j$  produces an output:

$$y_j^{(p)} = f(x_j^{(p)}) = f(\sum_k w_{jk} y_k^{(p)}) \quad [3]$$

As a result, each output node  $i$  receives:

$$x_i^{(p)} = \sum_j w_{ij} y_j^{(p)} = \sum_j w_{ij} f(\sum_k w_{jk} y_k^{(p)}) \quad [4]$$

$w_{ij}$  represent the weight between output node  $i$  and hidden node  $j$ . Therefore, the final output is:

$$y_i = f(x_i^{(p)}) = f(\sum_j w_{ij} y_j^{(p)}) = f(\sum_j w_{ij} f(\sum_k w_{jk} y_k^{(p)})) \quad [5]$$

Once all the input data is presented to the network during the backward pass, the error is calculated as the mean squared error (MSE) over all the output units. To improve the prediction and minimize the error, a method of updating the weights is critical for the network development. The learning process is centred on correcting the weights, after each iteration. The error is defined by the following function:

$$E = \frac{1}{2} \sum_i (y_i - d_i) \quad [6]$$

$d_i$  represents the desired output of each node  $i$  in the output layer. Function  $E$  is the continuous differentiable function of all the weights and therefore the method of gradient descent can be applied as:

$$\Delta w_{ij} = -n \frac{\partial E}{\partial w_{ij}} \quad [7]$$

$n$  represents a constant that determines the learning rate. Applying the chain rule the learning algorithm quantifies the derivative term  $\partial E / \partial w_{ij}$ . The complete derivation of the learning algorithm will not be presented as it lies outside the scope of this paper (Hush and Horne, 1999).

Once training is complete and the neural network has 'learnt' with the provided training samples, the influence of the input values on the output can be determined. Remembering that the information provided by the database observations is contained within the weights ( $W$ ) of the ANN, which is fixed once learning has been completed, it is then possible to compute the influence of the input on the output using these calculated weights (Yang and Zhang 1998). The BP has generated criticism with its ability to converge. However, if it is properly trained they tend to produce results that are reasonably accurate when new data set inputs are introduced (Naghadehi 2013).

## RESULTS

### Artificial Neural Network

The database of 141 case histories was constructed using the 18 classification parameters and the coding values mentioned above. The neural network developed for training has an architecture in the form of 18-18-1-1, which consists of an input layer (18 neurons), two hidden layers (18 neurons and 1 neuron respectively), and an output layer (1 neuron). Training was conducted on 90 % of data that is randomly selected. The mean squared error (MSE) for the training was calculated to be 0.0001 at 256 iterations. The convergence of input data to target data (Figure 3) shows that training of the ANN results in very good predictive capabilities. The network is then validated by simulating with 5 % of data, and then tested with the remaining 5 %.

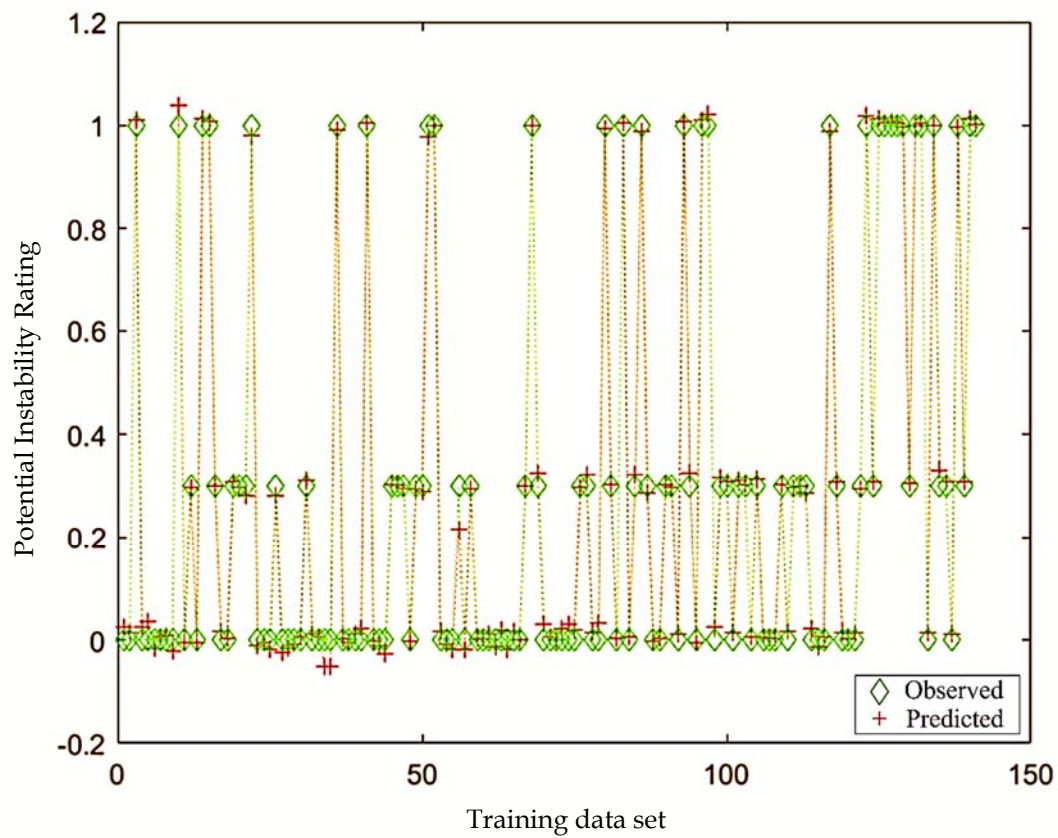


Figure 3: Convergence plot for training data set.

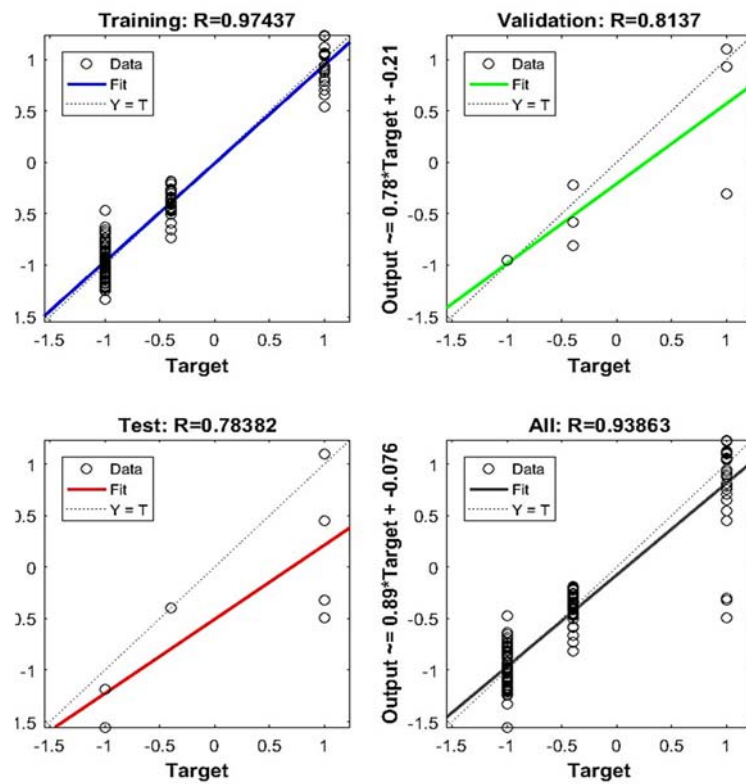


Figure 4: Regression analysis for training, validation and testing data.



The regression fit (Figure 4) is presented for all data sets, with an overall R value of 0.93. To obtain additional verification of the network performance, the error histogram (Figure 5a) is plotted. The bars represent the training data, validation data and test data. The errors are small for the training, validation and test sets, however there are samples which represent outliers. These outliers are valid data points, and may be the result of the network inferring for these points. The performance plot (Figure 5b) is a plot of the errors for all three sets. The results are reasonably good as the mean squared error is very small and no significant overfitting has occurred by iteration 256.

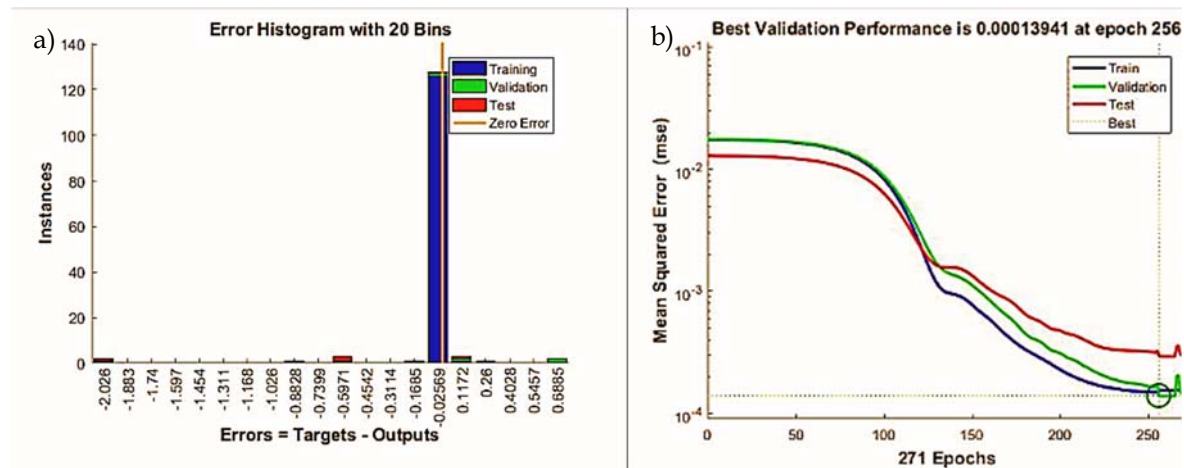


Figure 5: a) Error histogram; b) MSE performance.

### Parametric Study

To minimize subjectivity, the method of partitioning of the connection weights is applied in order to rate the significance of the involved parameters. The output of the parametric study is presented in Figure 6. The most dominant parameters are discontinuity characteristics such as aperture, persistence, number of major discontinuity sets, as well as orientation. This indicates that small changes in these parameter values may drastically affect the stability status of the open-pit slope. For example, weathering has the lowest dominance, with a percentage dominance of 3.7 %. In parallel, the highest rated parameter is discontinuity aperture with 7.3 %. Therefore, even though the parametric study provides valuable information concerning the most dominant parameters, it is clear that all the selected input parameters are very important according to the ANN, and all 18 parameters have to be considered in the computation of the OMSSI.

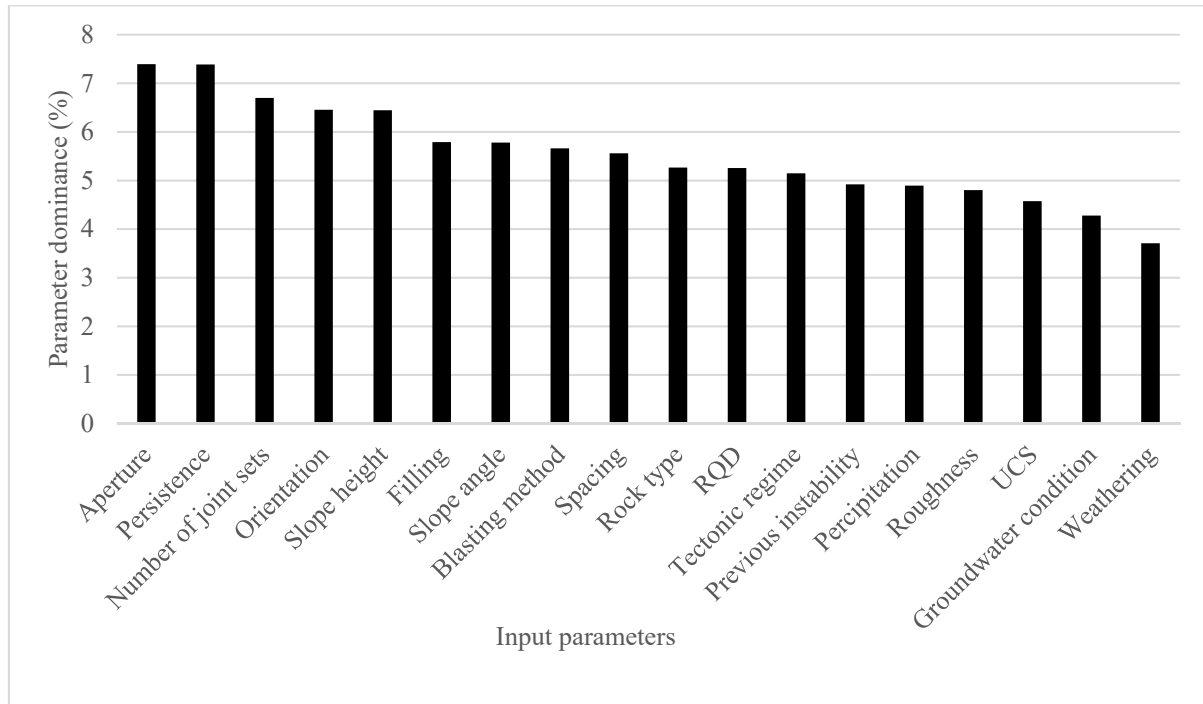


Figure 6: Parameter dominance within the rock engineering system.

### Open-pit Mine Slope Stability Index (OMSSI)

The values of each parameter are scaled in such a way that, when all the ratings are equal to the maximum value of 1, the maximum possible OMSSI value is 100. The OMSSI indicates the level of potential instability. Three zones of the stability status can be observed from Figure 7. A 'safe zone' for cases with values  $OMSSI \leq 50$  represent stable conditions; a zone with cases of higher possibility of failure in set of benches represent those of limited-scaled failure with values corresponding to  $51 \leq OMSSI \leq 62$ ; and a zone with cases of large scale or overall failures, corresponding to values of  $OMSSI \geq 62$ , representing unstable conditions.

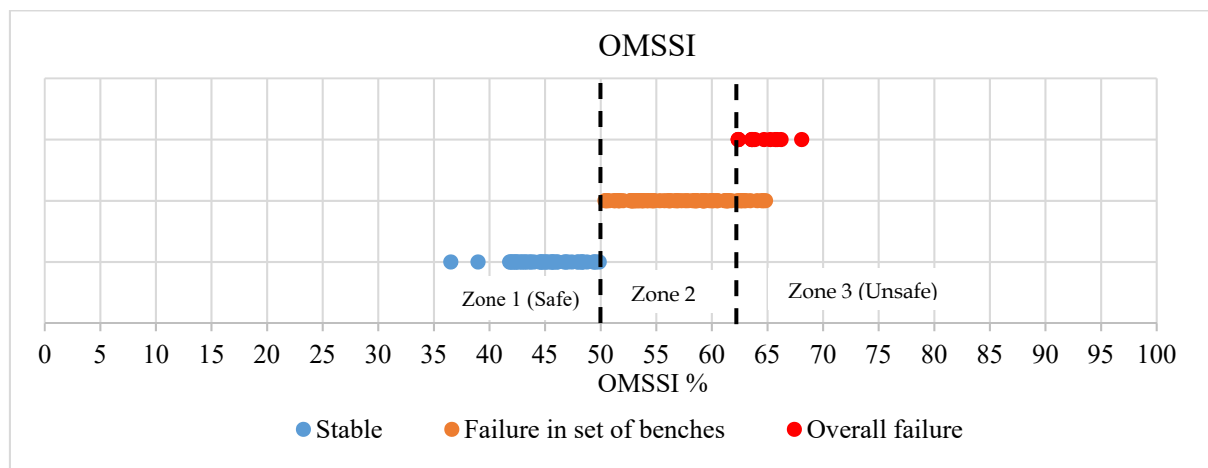


Figure 7: OMSSI zones of stability and values calculated for 126 cases of the database.

The results indicate three regions of pertaining to potential slope instability. There is an observed overlap between the status of stability for the whole dataset. This is expected since the OMSSI represents an empirical method. Despite the large number of factors that are considered, it cannot entirely replicate the complex reality of large scale rock engineering environments such as that of open-pit mines (Naghadehi, 2013). The limits between zones have therefore been selected conservatively. For example, there are slopes which are within Zone 1 predicted as "failure in set of benches", or even predicted as "overall failure"



when they fall within Zone 2. These are regarded as conservative errors as they predict the worst case scenario. Table I shows that while the majority of cases are successfully predicted, there are however cases that differ. The overall accuracy of the simulated results is shown by the ROC curve (Figure 8), with an area under the curve of 98 %.

Table I: Predicted cases

Mine	Observed behaviour	OMSSI	Status of Prediction
Orapa	Stable	46.77	Successful
Tati	Failure in set of benches	61.28	Successful
Jwaneng	Stable	51.24	Successful
Marathon	Failure in set of benches	57.86	Successful
Chandmari	Stable	60.48	Unsuccessful
Miduk	Overall failure	73.72	Successful
Mkuushi	Stable	45.28	Successful
Chadormalou	Stable	42.92	Successful
Choghart	Failure in set of benches	60.14	Successful
Sungun	Overall failure	62.69	Successful
Venetia	Stable	52.78	Unsuccessful
Chuquicamata	Failure in set of benches	56.7	Successful
Sandsloot	Stable	46.09	Successful
Aitik	Failure in set of benches	54.79	Successful
La Yesa	Failure in set of benches	59.2	Successful

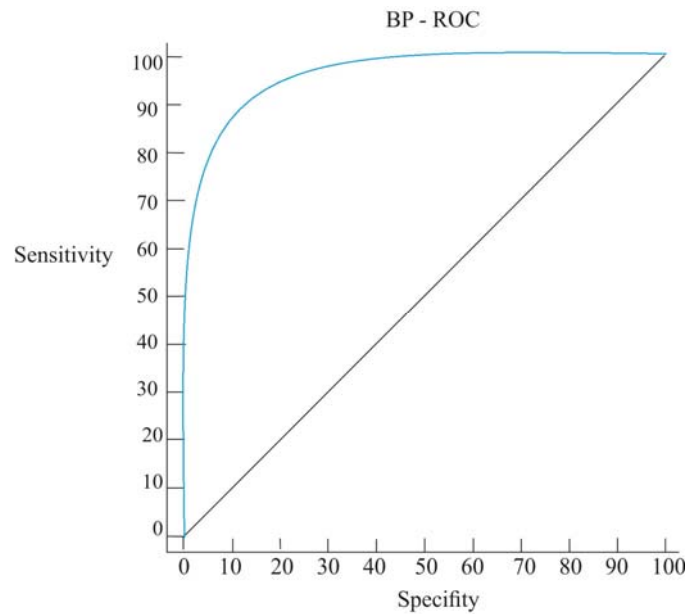


Figure 8: ROC curve

## CONCLUSION

The OMSSI is presented to assess the stability status of slopes in open-pit mines. The method employs ANN to account for the complex interactions that exist between parameters affecting slope stability in a holistic approach and provide reliable predictions for the status of stability. It is based on a worldwide database of case histories of open pit mines and therefore accounts for project specific characteristics of

slope failure. The 18 parameters employed are those, which are considered the key parameters affecting the design of open pit slopes, and which are easily obtainable. The BP methodology provides an objective rating of the importance of the parameters involved. Through partitioning of the weight matrix, analysis of the parameters dominance can be studied. It provides valuable insight into the parameters which control the stability status of open-pit slopes. Thus, allowing the identification of the most dominant parameters and identifying which parameters need to be controlled within the rock engineering environment. It is observed that even though discontinuity characteristics appear to be the most dominant parameters, all 18 parameters are significant for the construction of the OMSSI.

The OMSSI is validated by an additional number of case histories that are not utilized for training and of which differ concerning the conditions of stability. The results indicate that ANN is an ideal area for the application of open-pit mine slope stability analysis of real projects. However, the method is empirical and therefore further reliability can be improved as professionals become more acquainted with its use and the database is extended. Therefore, the OMSSI does not aim to replace conventional approaches to slope stability analysis. It does however provide a useful tool to provide accurate approximations to reality utilizing the available data.

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